DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 935 EC 303 881

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TITLE Empowering Students with Disabilities through Organization and Involvement in Student Government: A Step-by-Step Approach To Creating a Student Organization.
PUB DATE Jul 94
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the Association on Higher Education and Disabilities (Columbus, OH, July 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Advocacy; *College Students; *Disabilities; Higher Education; Leadership; *Organizational Development; Social Support Groups; *Student Organizations; Student Participation
IDENTIFIERS *Student Empowerment; *Weber State University UT

ABSTRACT

College students with disabilities, as a group, are becoming more involved with each other and are beginning to form student organizations. Major purposes of such organizations include: establishing a means for students with disabilities to make their voices heard on issues relating to disability, creating a social support system for students with disabilities, and providing leadership experience and involvement opportunities for students with disabilities. At Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, a step-by-step process to establish a student organization was implemented. The process involved: developing a trusting relationship between staff and students, beginning the organizational process, registering the organization with the university, empowering the students through leadership training and motivating them to take the initiative in planning and implementing activities, and offering support and advice. At Weber, students chose the organization's name, elected officers, conducted fund-raising activities, became an organized body that spoke out on campus issues and provided each other with a social network, became less dependent on the university's service department, and increased disability awareness on campus and in the community. (JDD)

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Empowering Students with Disabilities Through Organization and Involvement in Student Government: A Step-by-Step Approach to Creating a Student Organization

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As presented to the AHEAD Conference

in Columbus, Ohio

July 1994

EC 303881

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Abstract

Historically those with disabilities have not been involved with each other in groups. However, attitudes are changing, as more colleges and universities are realizing the benefits of students with disabilities organizing.

We identified three major purposes of organizations for students with disabilities: (1) Establish a means for students with disabilities to make their voices heard on issues relating to disability, (2) Create a social support system for students with disabilities, and (3) Provide leadership experience and involvement opportunities for students with disabilities. We found the key element to be EMPOWERMENT of the students.

We developed a step-by-step process to establish a student organization, which was recognized by the university. The organizational process began with creating an environment conducive to relationship building between staff and students. Once this base was established, together with the students, the decision was made to organize. Next, a meeting was planned to name the organization and elect officers. We then followed the procedural requirements of the university. As the organization became more secure, we turned responsibility over to the students. The final and continuing step involves motivation, support, advisement, and leadership training.

The benefits gained from organizing the students surpassed our initial goals. Beyond empowering the students individually and as a group, we found the gains extended to the service department, the university, and the community.

College students need involvement and leadership opportunities. John Gardner (1988), former president of Carnegie Foundation, emphasizes the importance of group activities, student government, and off-campus activities in which students can test their judgement. Weber State University has always been committed to student involvement, including student government and student organizations.

Historically those with disabilities have not been involved as a group. Much of this has been by their own choice. Paul Longmore (1993), assistant professor of history at San Francisco State University, who teaches a class on disability and has a disability, remembers a time when he "would never have considered associating with other people with disabilities . . . and . . . most

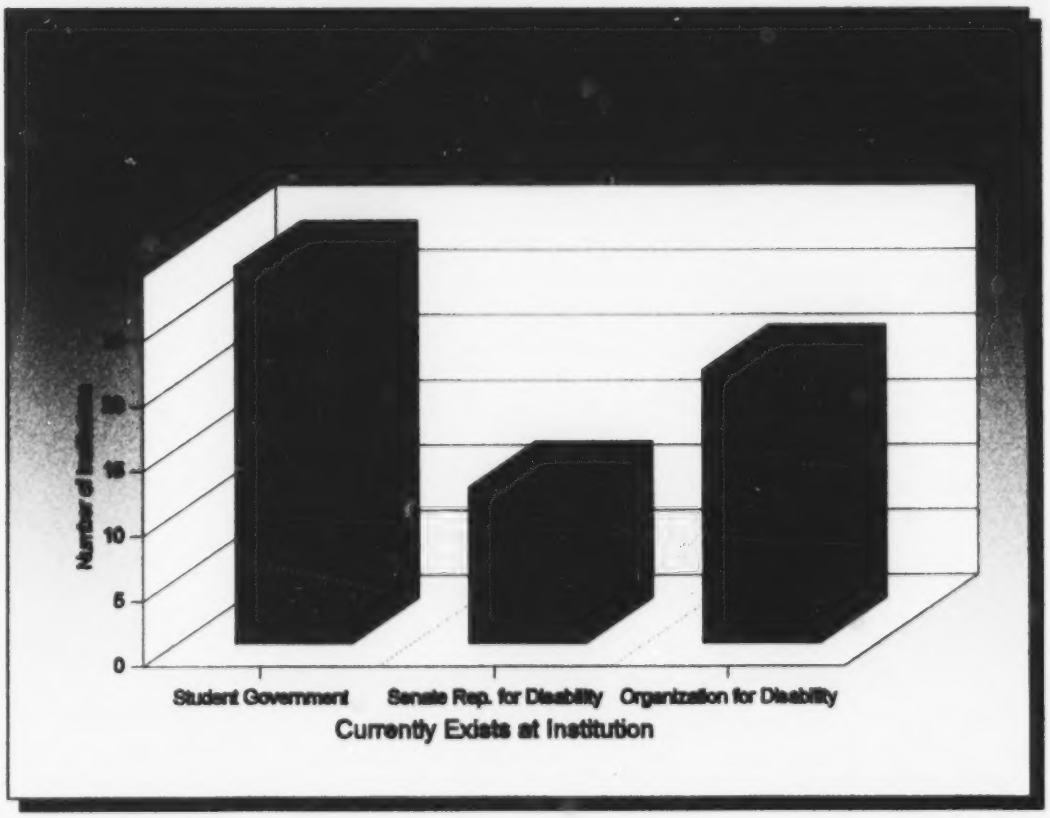

Figure 1

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people with disabilities in that era would have felt the same way." Attitudes are starting to change. An informal survey of thirty universities across the nation, taken from the Association for Higher Education And Disability (AHEAD) membership directory, had these results, as represented in **Figure 1** on the previous page: Twenty-nine had student government; twelve had representation for students with disabilities in student government; and twenty-one had organizations for students with disabilities (Flinders, 1994).

In 1986 things began to change at Weber. For the first time, a seat in the student senate was created to represent students with disabilities. The process was instigated by a political science major with a disability. He, with backing from the department who serves students with disabilities, approached the student senate requesting the seat. It was voted on, and the request was granted. Some years have worked better than others. At times, interest has waned, and only one candidate has run for office. Other times, competition has been tough, and there has been some division in the students. Some years, senators have failed to communicate with their constituents, making the senators ineffective.

In 1987, the first organization for students with disabilities, Physically Challenged Student Organization (PCSO), was formed. The organization started with some student involvement but was largely controlled by the service department. The senate and organization were separate entities, with each unaware of what the other was doing. Neither experienced long-lived success.

After PCSO died out the students began to feel the loss of not having a group with which to identify. Those who remembered PCSO asked what happened to the student organization. Many new students felt lost and alone. It was time to revive the student organization, but we were determined not to repeat mistakes of the past. We realized the past organization was

missing one essential ingredient--EMPOWERMENT of the students. Webster (1992) defines "empower" as "to give official or legal power or authority to; to endow with an ability; enable." We believed the process would not be giving the students power, authority, and ability, as much as helping them discover and develop what they already had.

After talking with students and soliciting their ideas, we established three basic goals of the organization. (1) Establish a means for students with disabilities to make their voices heard on issues relating to disability; (2) Create a social support system for students with disabilities; (3) Provide leadership experience and involvement opportunities for students with disabilities.

We used a pyramid format for our model because each step builds on the one before. The organizational process began with creating an environment conducive to relationship building between staff and students. Developing a trusting relationship is a natural process, but we were able to identify key elements.

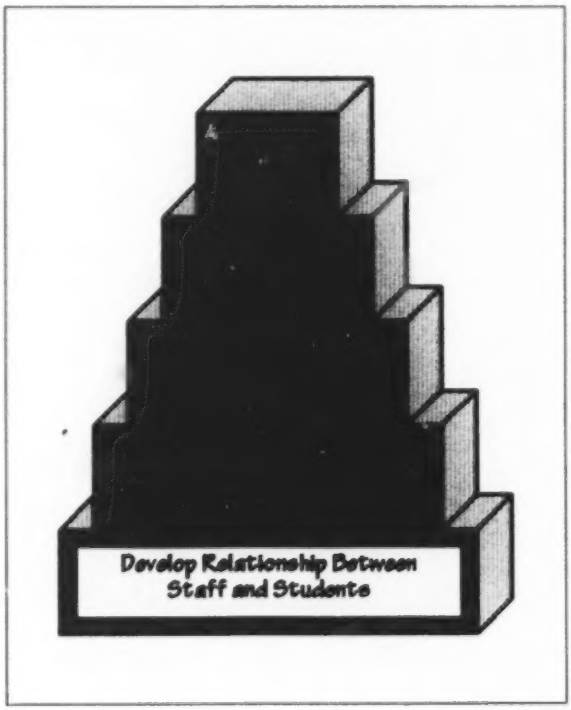

Figure 2

First, show interest in each individual student. While it is important to have office policies, keep in mind that each person and each situation is unique. Do not loose sight of the reason for the office's existence--to provide the best possible support services to help students achieve their educational goals.

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Maintaining an open-door policy may not be feasible for every office, but it has worked well for us. Keeping the door open allows students to drop in just to say "hi," see what is happening in the office, or tell someone about something significant to them.

We have been fortunate to have a lounge area where the students can hang out and socialize with each other. For many students, this is their main (and in some cases, only) social contact on campus. In this environment, friendships were established, leading to the beginnings of an informal group. We then nurtured this group through office-sponsored social gatherings. The students began to rely more on each other and less on office personnel for social and emotional needs. They supported each other when teachers were difficult to work with, personal factors interfered with school, or anything else came up.

Seeing the benefits of the informal group, we believed these benefits could be enhanced through organizing a formal group that would be recognized by the university. In addition to the benefits of interaction, some funding and other opportunities are available to registered organizations.

Figure 3

Despite the advantages we could see in organizing, we realized the decision lay with the students. We decided to throw the idea out and see what kind of response we would get. We sent a flyer, announcing a

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pizza party and plans to organize a student organization, to all students registered with our office. The positive response let us know that either the students were interested in organizing--or they really liked pizza. We discovered both were true. The students came with empty stomachs and heads full of ideas and expectations for an organization.

The students' goals for the organization were similar to the ideas we had come up with. They believed organizing would help them become closer and more supportive of one another, both with personal difficulties and with issues that affect the larger population.

The students came up with a variety of names, most of which were acronyms, but their final choice, "Aware," represents the importance of being aware of their potential as human beings, what disability means, and issues related to disability. Officers were nominated and elected for four offices: president, vice president over issues, vice president over activities, and secretary/treasurer.

Now the ball was rolling, and it was time to meet the requirements to register the organization. At Weber State University, registration of an organization requires a constitution with a contracted employee named advisor to the organization. Some universities may also require a registration fee.

We opted to have the same advisor for the organization and the student senator. This

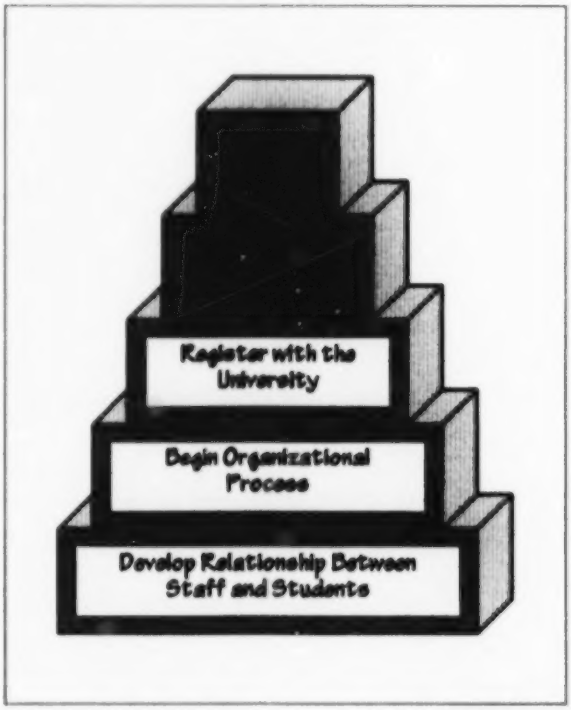

Figure 4

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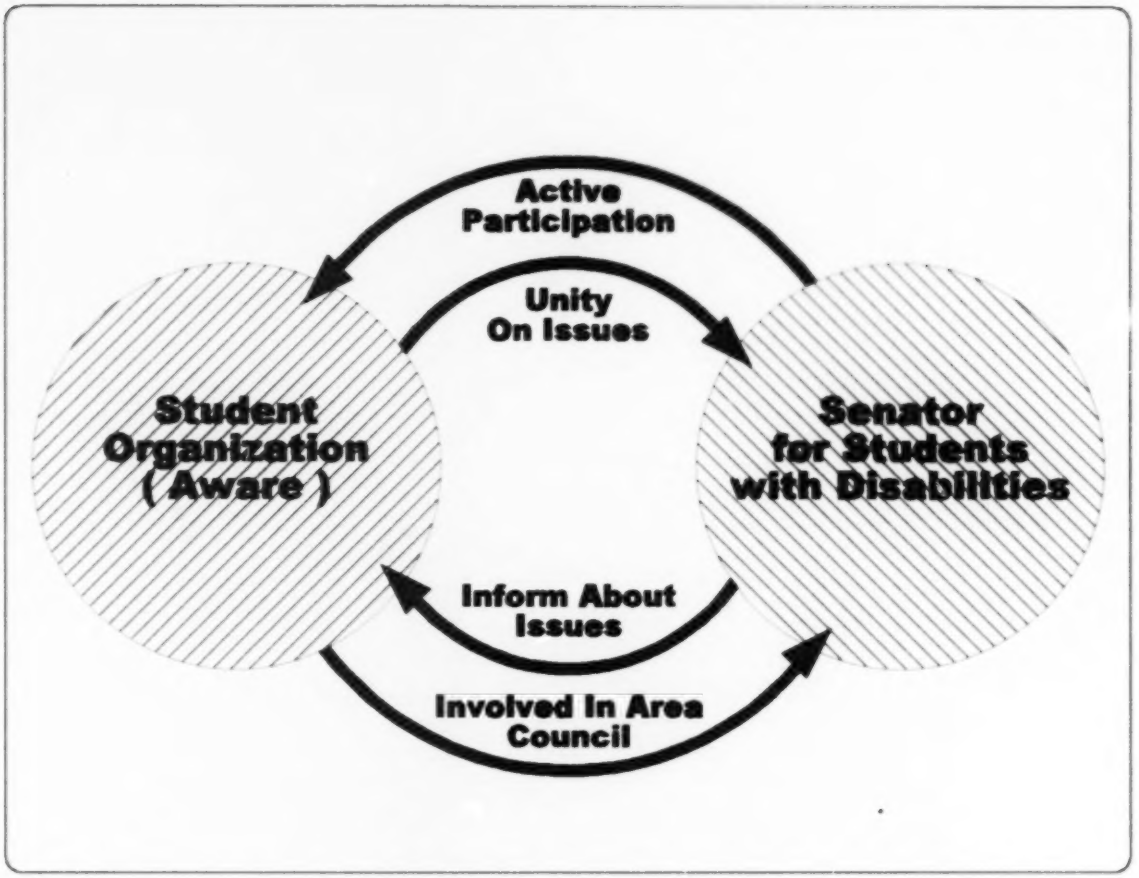

Figure 5

made it easier for them to work together for the good of the students. This dynamic is graphically illustrated in **Figure 5** above.

Sometimes one of the most difficult parts is getting the organization off the ground financially, particularly if there is a registration fee. The officers opted to charge an initial membership fee of $5.00, and the office personnel supported them by joining and paying the fee. We also helped them create and copy flyers and cut out mailing expenses by allowing them to put flyers in with material we mailed for the office.

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Turning the responsibility over to the students is a gradual process and is not always easy for either staff or students. We began with leadership training. We had funds to sponsor two students for a leadership conference. Because we were now a registered organization, the university agreed to sponsor two more.

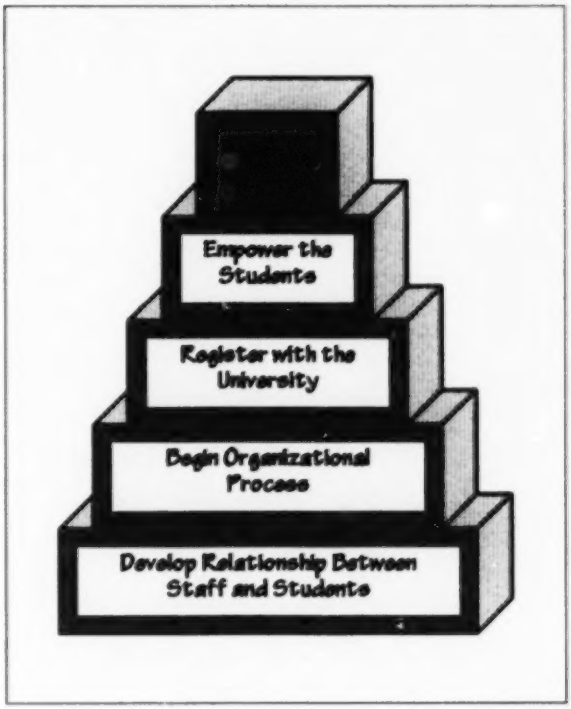

Empower the Students
Register with the University
Begin Organizational Process
Develop Relationship Between Staff and Students

Figure 6

Gradually, the students took more initiative in planning and implementing activities. I was available as their advisor, but the officers began working together to make things happen. I discussed fund raising with them, but they came up with a successful idea and took off with it. They solicited donations from local businesses and earned over $300 on a suggested donation raffle. They then opened a checking account for the organization. It is a good idea to have the advisor's name on the account. An additional safety catch may be to require two signatures on the checks.

Even after the students take over most of the planning and implementing for the group, it is important to continue encouragement, support, advisement, and involvement. Stay involved with the students. Support activities. Know what money is coming in and going out. Help officers keep on track with the stated purpose of the organization.

To effectively advise, stay abreast of issues, including Americans with Disabilities Act, and network with other agencies. Motivate and offer ideas. Help students discover their potential as leaders. Be sensitive. Trust students enough to allow them to succeed and/or fail. Support their efforts and activities, even if they do things differently than you would. Maybe you'll learn something. We sure did!

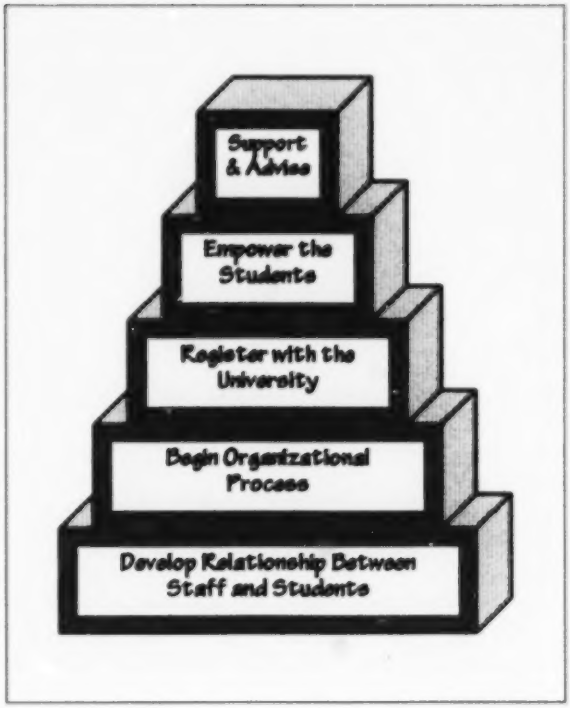


Figure 7

The benefits gained from organizing the students surpassed our initial goals. They extended beyond individual students and the empowered group to the service department, the university, and the community.

Individual students increased in self confidence and self esteem. Their social skills improved both visibly and by their own report. They had the opportunity to practice leadership skills. They networked with the community, building resources for future employment.

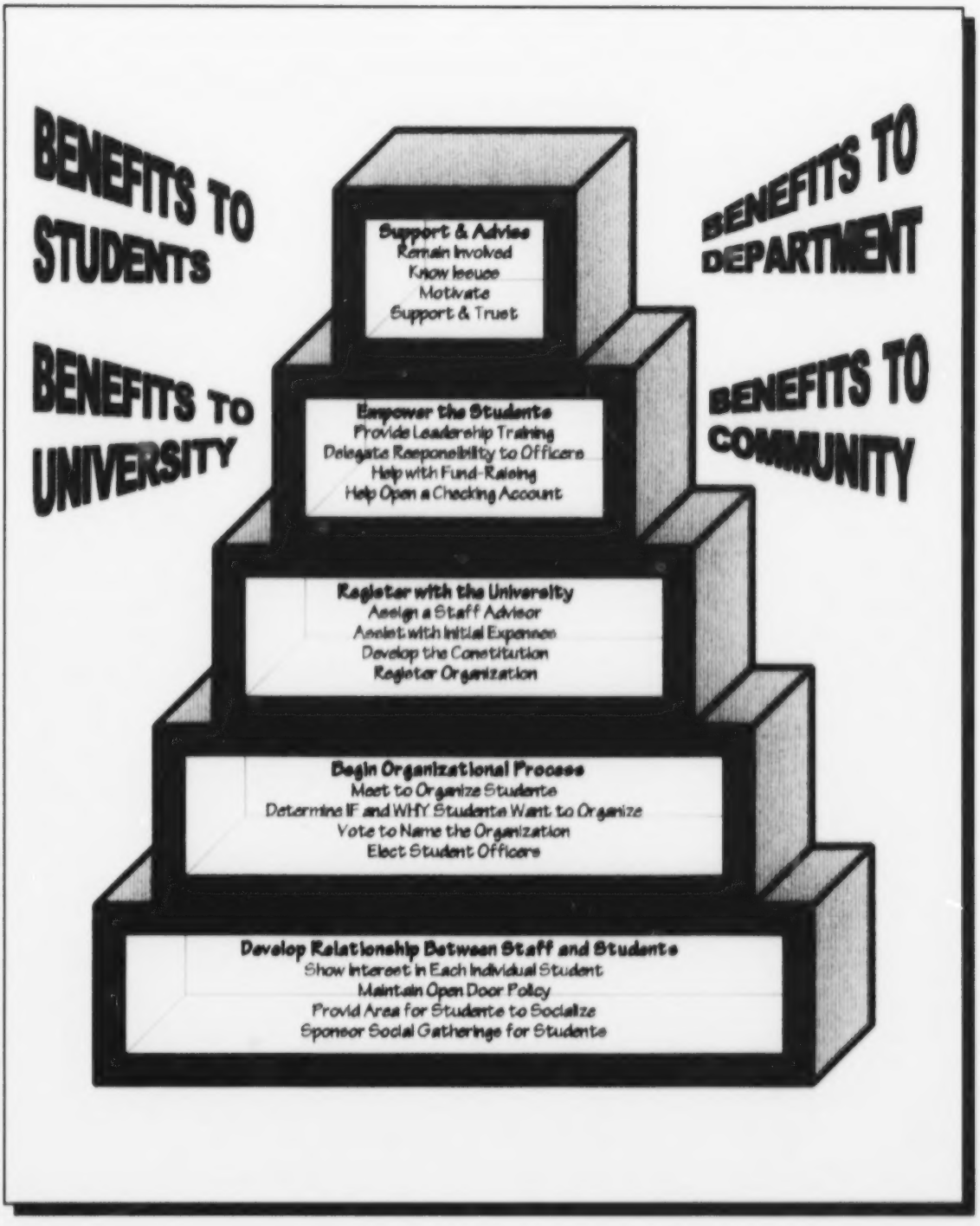
The students, as a group, became an organized body that spoke out on campus issues related to disability and provided each other with a social network. The group successfully made their voices heard on campus issues, including priority registration for students with disabilities and student fee money allotted for tutoring and other services for students with disabilities.

The Service Department has also benefited. Because the students have developed a

support system, they are less dependant on the office for social/emotional support, and employees are more available to provide other services. In addition, the organized body of students has helped obtain tutoring money from student fees and influenced the University Strategic Planning Committee to move the service department from the restructure/reduce list to the restructure list.

The organized body has increased awareness of disability on campus. They have spoken and participated on panels in classrooms, sponsored faculty awareness events, and, in conjunction with the student senator, hosted *Disability Emphasis Week*. They have offered information concerning safety issues on campus, especially obstructions which are dangerous to those with visual impairment.

The students have provided a similar service in the community. They have spoken to church and community organizations, participated on panels, and visited the local high schools to encourage high school students and let them know what resources are available. They have also been involved with the ADA Legislative Committee.



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